

User research as a social practice: A practice theory approach to the problem of usage of sociological knowledge outside academia

The general aim of the planned research is to advance the understanding of the use of sociological knowledge outside academia. It will be accomplished by employing a practice theory approach to examine a practice of user research in which sociological knowledge is adopted and utilized.

Practice theory is a broad theoretical approach that has received considerable attention within sociology in the last two decades, sometimes even labelled as a 'practice turn'. It suggests that the utilization of knowledge should not be understood as mechanically putting it to use outside the context of its origins as in the popular metaphor of 'knowledge transfer', but should be rather conceptualized as a dynamic process of the adaptation of knowledge to the 'receiving' practice. Instead of being simply transferred knowledge has to be abstracted from a local context, travel and become re-contextualise elsewhere.

This project focuses on user research as a social, non-academic practice of 'doing' social research that utilizes elements of sociological methodology. User research is conventionally defined as aiming to understand users' behaviours, reactions, habits and needs in order to design products (both material and digital) and services. The problem to be solved in the planned research is how the sociological methodological knowledge have been adapted, redefined and integrated with other elements to constitute the practice of user research. It is assumed that this adaptation has not been a one-off acquisition, but a dynamic process of integration of diverse elements (e.g. other kinds of knowledge and competence, technologies, meanings, institutional backgrounds, relationship with other fields of practice etc.) through which a practice of user research emerged and developed.

The project is planned as an extensive case study using a diverse set of sources: in-depth interviews with professionals related to the field of user research; two participant observations (each lasting one month) in studios or departments conducting user research; secondary data analysis (expert literature, internet sources, presentations at user research conferences, etc.).

The contemporary societies as knowledge societies as increasingly relying on knowledge, especially scientific knowledge. Thus, understanding how scientific knowledge circulates between social environments, how it is adopted and utilized, is of the utmost importance. The results of the planned research will provide a more theoretically refined, process oriented, context-sensitive and empirically saturated understanding of the usage of sociological knowledge outside academia. The results of this project will also contribute to the present hot discussion on the social impact of science.